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ABSTRACT

Film instruction has been distinctly marked by three major developments that have evolved over the past decade. First of all, a film genre has emerged which is relatively free of the old pedagogical emphasis. The attributes of film form and content that were once rejected by classroom teachers now have become the legitimate raw material for film instruction. Secondly, the motion picture as an art form has become an object of study in the high school curriculum. Though film does not supplant the standard English literature courses, it has been offered as a viable option in the requirements for high school graduation. And finally, filmmaking itself has been incorporated into the curricula of both high schools and elementary schools. The implications of these developments are wide ranging. Primarily, they force higher educational functions upon the teachers and students. (MC)

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THE STATE OF THE ART OF FILMS IN INSTRUCTION, 1972:

A Second Look

by

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The State of the Art of Films in Instruction: 1972

by

Charles F. Hoban

The rapid diffusion of at least three major developments mark the state of the art of films in instruction in 1972 beyond that previously reported and discussed.

Each of these developments is in its own way characterized by a welcome brightness and freshness of approach. Each in its own way comes to grips with educational objectives more proclaimed than implemented in the past, and, for that matter, in the present, too.

At long last, films have come into their own in instruction, except on the more stuffy college and university campuses. Departments of audio-visual instruction, centers of instructional materials, or centers of communication in instruction -- whatever they may be called -- are no longer faced so much with the problem of "selling" the use of films to teachers, but with supplying teacher demands for films and providing guidance in selection and strategies of film use.

This new status of films in instruction is not sui generis. It is a consequence partly of stylistic and technological changes in film form and techniques; partly of a modish revival of interest in the past generated by the need for permanence and for roots in historical continuity; and partly as an aspect of the search for self-actualization, social understanding, and creative expression.

Obviously, the developments discussed here did not happen all at once in the year of 1972 A.D. But they have been at least rapidly accelerated in the past decade. This acceleration of development is the more remarkable when viewed in the context of emphasis on other and newer technologies of instruction -- instructional television, the audio-cassette, the three-sided box for individualized instruction, computerized instruction, gaming and simulation, etc., etc.

Let us agree to agree in the discussion to follow that:

a. the developments selected for discussion do not enjoy universal popularity;

b. they, too, are subject to abuses of human ineptitude in their production and use;

c. their underlying assumptions are likely to be transformed into axioms and thus remain unexamined, and unevaluated.

We teachers have a tendency to gallop off on wild horses. In the zest and excitement of the ride, we tend to believe that we have tamed them. Perhaps so, perhaps not.

With these caveats in mind, and remembering that we are not here trying to cover the waterfront, let us turn to the three major developments selected from among the many that could be discussed.

Major Developments

1. A film genre has emerged which is relatively free of the old pedagogical emphasis: i.e., it is relatively free of instruction spelled with a capital "I". Films of this genre no longer present "Just the facts, man!" Rather, this new film genre resembles a happening or a set or series of happenings, more than the traditional linear order of expository sequence of pictures and words. This is particularly true of the short films for discussion but by no means confined to them.

As set forth above, this assertion is better than a zero approximation of an objective, verifiable state of affairs, or, if you prefer, state of the art. Throughout the remainder of this paper, this film genre will be referred to as the non-pedagogical teaching film. The term non-pedagogical is used in preference to the term non-didactic since some of these new films are broadly didactic in intent but without the heavy-handedness that exudes an aura of blah.

2. The motion picture as an art form has become an object of study in the high school curriculum. As often as not, courses in appreciation of motion pictures are offered as one of the several new options in place of the standard "English Literature" course in the senior year of the high school curriculum. It does not replace the standard course, but is offered as an option to what too often has been a dysfunctional if not poisonous requirement for high school graduation.

At this point, your writer must admit to a personal bias. After taking a bachelor's and a master's degree in English and American literature, he became a refugee from the dreariness of content and the triviality of archeological approach in the field of literature. Hopefully, during the past forty years there has been a change for the better in the teaching of English and American literature. Nonetheless, against personal background of experience in academically prescribed study of these fields, your writer considers that any justifiable alternative -- no matter how mesmerized or oversold by its messiahs -- is a step in the direction of desirable progress.

3. Associated with, but not necessarily contingent upon, the study of motion pictures as an art form is the introduction of filmmaking into the curriculum of the high schools and even the elementary schools. The development of student filmmaking in the schools has been accelerated by at least two

technological advances: the Super 8mm camera and projector and the magnetic sound track. No small additional impetus in filmmaking in the schools has been provided by (a) the free enterprise aggressiveness of camera producers and their sales representatives, and (b) the largesse of the federal government in the equipment area of instructional technology and in training teachers to use this equipment. In passing, it seems a pity that governmental agencies, commissions, institutes and what-nots appear to be less concerned with concepts and theoretical formulations underlying educational technology and its goals than it is with the promotion of overexpectation and the generous funding of technology's gadgetry, gimmickry, and games.

* * *

The three developments indicated above are in addition to other well-known innovations in films in instruction, such as the single-concept film, the film loop, the integration of films into individually prescribed and/or programmed instruction, and the remarkable growth in the use of films of all sorts in teaching at all levels and in all areas of teaching and training.

The "Novelty" of the "New" Film Innovations

In a sense, none of these three "new" film developments is new. Rather, each is a revival of a deja-vu.

The documentary film, which goes back in this country at least to the genius and talent of Robert Flaherty, is not now or ever was pedagogical in the narrow, school-masterish sense. In broad intent it was always educational, and had more of a "story line" than many of the newer film genre, but it also was quasi-mosaic in its "slice of life" approach.

The greatest difference between the "then" and the "now" of the non-pedagogical film is in its acceptance by teachers as legitimate raw material for teaching purposes. Only a few decades ago, such classics as "The Plow that Broke the Plains" and "The River," by Pare Lorenz, were regarded by classroom teachers as some kind of a put-on when presented at teachers' meetings and conferences as the real "stuff" of teaching films.

Today, the very attributes of film form and content that were once rejected by classroom teachers are now the "in" things of films in instruction. Teachers today search the film libraries near and far for non-pedagogical films, i.e., the new film genre. And their production sources are varied -- the Canadian Film Board, the television networks, the university art centers, to name only a few.

Also, it is misleading to think that the study of motion pictures as an art form is a paradigm uniquely and historically originating a few years ago, in the Bronx, for instance. Edgar Dale's pioneering How to Appreciate Motion Pictures, prepared and published as a manual of motion picture criticism for high school students, was published by The Macmillan Company in 1934! This book is not essentially different in objectives or content from today's books on motion pictures as an art form.

Neither, for that matter, is filmmaking by high school students an innovation of the decade of the 60's in which everything rediscovered was naively believed to be newly invented. Back in the 1930's students in the Denver, Colorado, high schools made motion pictures dealing largely with aspects of life and living in the community. They did this both as part of the high school curriculum and as a contribution to its enrichment and relevance.

This exploration in educational innovation was fully reported by Floyde Brooker and Eugene Harrington in one of the American Council on Education Studies in 1941, under the title of "Students Make Motion Pictures." Incidently, Brooker and Harrington also reported that during the previous two years more than 400 high schools had produced some 700 reels of film.

None of the preceding discussion of the non-novelty of the new movements in films in instruction is intended as a put-down of exciting educational currencies or an exercise in a faculty's great game of one-upmanship. Psychologically, rediscovery is discovery by those making it. All of us go through the rediscovery process periodically -- rediscovering on one level of cognition what we had previously known on another level, or in another context, or what others had advanced before our day.

Some Differences between Then and Now

An important difference between films in instruction now and in years past is that the technology of filmmaking and film use has increased in sophistication, complexity, and cost.

a. Color film has come to stay. Generally speaking, film research indicates that while students do not "learn more" from color than from black and white films, what they do "learn" they remember longer. What we have in color film and color TV is a "new dimension" of pictorial experience. It has a strong affective appeal. If we value the affective domain in education we are not being fair to the use of color if we judge its contribution in narrow terms of increased "learning" power.

Color film, however, has its price. Its effective employment requires a sensitivity to and knowledge of light and tonal values. Familiarity with primary colors and their combinations is a prerequisite. If filters are used, we must know what color filters to use for what effect. Also involved is the additional cost of color film and its processing.

b. The technology of the projector has also become more sophisticated, more versatile in its speeds, and more varied in kind. The 16mm projector is no longer adequate as the universal workhorse of instructional films. We now also require the 8mm and the Super 8mm projector if we are to use the films available for instruction. This increases the logistical problems of projector supply and maintenance, and the cost factor as well.

Problems also arise with the magnetic sound track. Sometimes it is recorded at a different speed than that at which the film is projected. This results in a loss in the quality of sound which the film producer often works so hard to achieve.

c. The use of animation has increased in frequency and changed in kind. In today's film courses in high school, students are introduced to, given instruction in, and required to produce animation by hand on individual frames of film within a 2x2 matrix of sprocket holes.

And object animation has acquired a new and important status. Object animation is said to be three-dimensional on a two-dimensional screen surface. And, in a limited sense, it is. If you are a McLuhanite, you can easily see that object animation (in contrast to line or line-figure animation) acquires not only a new spatial dimension but also a tactility in the feel of the object in you hands, your muscles, your pulse beat, and even in the chemistry of your glands. This is an aspect of McLuhan's principle of sensory complementation.

This principle holds that a unisensory medium is complemented by activation of other senses for completeness of experience. Simply stated, it says that people hear what they read, feel what they see, and see what they hear. There is much evidence in the common experience in validation of this principle.

It would be nice here to discuss McLuhan at greater length, particularly since his principles of media underly some of the discussion to follow. However, that is a story beyond the telling here.

Some Implications of Newer Film Developments for Instruction

Again, within the limits of this talk (paper) we can take up only a few of the implications of newer film developments for instruction -- hopefully some of the most important implications.

1. The new non-pedagogical film forces higher educational functions on teachers and students.

The teacher may indeed select this film genre because of its higher educational functions, but, willy-nilly, once it is selected and used the film imposes the need for active reorganization of experience on both the teacher and the students.

There is still a place for the straight expository film which tells and shows it as it is. But there is also a need beyond exposition. The non-pedagogical film - properly exploited for its educational values - meets this need. It demands of both teacher and student the transformation, transubstantiation, and transignification of experience.

In not too subtle ways, the new film genre is frequently not only open-ended; it is not structured in linear, building-block pattern. Its message is frequently not explicit, nor is there always clarity in its intention.

With some exceptions, the why, how, and what-for are not spelled out in these films. Sometimes they are not even implicit. Hence the need to change its form, its substance, and its significance if the film is to make sense - or, more properly, if sense is to be made out of the film.

Take for example the delightful and widely used film, "Clay (Origin of Species)," one of the short Contemporary Films marketed by McGraw-Hill. It is done in object animation of clay with a musical score. Not a word is spoken in the sound track. The film does not seriously attempt to deal with Darwin's concept of evolution and natural selection, but, in the words of the catalogue, it is the film creator's "intriguing visual variation on Darwin." Again, quoting from the catalogue, it "does not seriously follow any theory of natural history" but instead "evolves its own kind of free-wheeling clay life."

But the critical viewer gags slightly at the catalogue statement that "While suggesting deeper meanings, CLAY is basically simple in concept." Unfortunately, in viewing this fascinating and thoroughly enjoyable film, the "basically simple concept" escaped this writer, and after reading the catalogue blurb, it still does.

The point is that if the viewer is to do more than view the film as fun and delight for its own sake, the film forces on both teachers and students the burden of teasing out the meaning of the film, of imposing a conceptual structure on it, and, in effect, re-producing it. The meaning of the film in terms of life's upward struggle, the motivation to create with clay, the attractive change in student attitude toward a lump of wet, sticky clay are not in the film itself -- not in its pictorial continuity and not in its musical sound track -- but must be inferred and elicited. The form, syntax, and rhetoric of the film content and structure force the teacher and the student into a depth of teaching far beyond that of insuring that both simply "copy reality" from the film.

Otherwise, the film might just as well, or perhaps better, be viewed at home over TV.

With the forcing function of the new genre films at work, the old established rituals of teaching by telling, showing, assigning, and time-binding are threatened. If we are not wary and on guard, we teachers can actually be forced to engage in education for what it is -- the process of extending, drawing out, reorganizing, and reconstructing experience.

2. The new emphasis on the use of music without narration in films imposes on filmmakers, teachers, and students a heavy burden of pictorial explicitness, whether built-in by the filmmaker or induced by the teachers and students.

It is something of a truism that music is a "language" of mood and of feelings. Occasionally it is used as an alert to elicit suspense or anticipation, but music is not a medium of exposition, narration, or explanation.

There is a spreading recognition that much of the "teaching" content of films is carried in the voice narration or dialogue, and that correspondingly pictures entertain (in the best sense of entertainment) and tend to occupy the focus of attention. Furthermore, with the uncertainty of channel capacity and information processing organization of the nervous system, the question of multimodal information processing (pictures and words, pictures and music, or both) in the human organism comes again to the fore.

Perception of musical accompaniment to a motion picture is more often than not subliminal, i.e., not within conscious awareness. When this is so, then the mood message of the music is "unheard." And when "unheard," music provides useful "noise" which interferes with the ambient chatter and clatter of the classroom and thereby increases the privacy of pictorial viewing. The viewer is alone with his picture.

This point on the narrationless film with musical accompaniment is very closely related to the first point above on the forcing functions of the new film genre. It complicates the forcing functions of the non-pedagogical film by providing fewer cues to meanings and by placing on the pictorial mode a message-carrying task that only the most talented or, strangely enough, the least sophisticated are prepared to carry through successfully.

3. The value of filmmaking as part of the curriculum is as much in the craftmanship of making the film as in the film that is made.

One of the hidden incursions of student filmmaking is craftsmanship in schools dominated by white collar, college educated, print oriented mentalities. With craftsmanship comes not only skill in work and pride in product but a sensuous richness of clutter, odor, and sensitive touch. The stiff and proper world of a-place-for-everything and everything-in-its-place is transformed into the messy reality of manual work -- film hanging in strips to be put aside or put together in the editing process, film on the floor, film to be washed, sticky scotch tape that twists and curls around fingers, the acrid odor of splicing, and so on. And the time comes for wash-up and clean-up, too.

Throughout the process of filmmaking there is also an inescapable demand for delicacy and precision in composition, focus, light, shutter speed, editing, etc. Instant success is impossible. Required are patience, persistence, and slowly developed complex skills. Sloppiness and carelessness have a fixed price: Do it over and do it right!

No claim can be made for generalizability of the essentials of excellence demanded by filmmaking. Nonetheless, they can be a counterforce to the sloppiness that has crept into corporate, governmental, individual, and institutional performance.

4. In filmmaking and film study in the school curriculum, attention is tempted to concern with techniques, gadgetry, and gimmickry.

Obviously, any art is not devoid of technique, but it is more than technique. Techniques are instrumental, and their values lie in the substantative responses and meanings they elicit from the viewer or listener. Sophistication in the technology of filmmaking does not necessarily help us to discriminate among the excellent, the mediocre, or the trash in motion pictures.

There is no certainty that we are on the right track in the study of film as an art form in going more and more and deeper and deeper into production technology and, consequently, that we are enhancing appreciation of the art of the film. Art is not art because we call it art. And art is not art when the artist plays around with the medium -- the paint, the brush, the spray gun, the blow torch, the scissors -- or the camera, or the cuts. It may be great fun but it is not in se great art.

5. In film, as in other areas of experience, hedonism is easily triumphant over enlightenment.

In some of the new film genre hedonism is transparently triumphant. The gimmickery is great. The "kids" love these films for their fast cutting, their frantic activity, but the message is lost; or worse, the wrong lesson is taught. In this case, teachers might as well be showing the cartoons that, up to recently, filled the Saturday morning TV schedule.

6. Self-concern or preoccupation with in-group subjects in filmmaking is not, contrary to popular belief, limited to emerging minority groups such as blacks or Puerto Ricans.

All one has to do is view the films made by college and graduate students to realize that self-concern and attention to in-group anxieties and frustrations are also prevalent among middle-class whites. They are expressed in the films they make, the writing they do, the pictures they paint, and the graffiti they draw on the boarded baffles of campus construction pits. Differences among sub-cultures are at the level and symbolism of expression, and in the ambiguities of educated suburbanites.

This is the age of the search and the hunt. While expressed perhaps in different ways among various sub-cultures, it is nonetheless expressed by all.

* * *

By no means is the subject of the state of the art of films in instruction, 1972, exhausted at this point. But your writer is -- at this moment. So now you pick it up and run with it.